

Lone working

a UNISON guide for members



Spending time working alone increases the risks to your health and safety. This leaflet can help you identify:

1. Whether and to what extent you are at risk from lone working;
2. What you and your employer should be doing to improve your safety and security.

What is lone working and how does it affect me?

The term “lone worker” covers all those working without close or direct supervision and the close contact of others. You don’t have to work in complete isolation all of the time to be considered a lone worker. For example a receptionist may work in a department which is busy during certain times of the day, but quiet and isolated at others, such as outside normal working hours.

Examples of staff who may work alone for at least some of the time include:

- Maintenance staff;
- Porters and security staff;
- Parking wardens/attendants;
- Rent collectors;
- Community and residential nursing and care staff;
- Home care workers;
- Library staff;
- Receptionists;
- Career advisors.

This list is by no means exhaustive. Can you think of other jobs that involve lone working?

Why can lone working be so dangerous?

People who work alone face the same hazards in their daily work as other workers. However, for lone workers there will always be a greater risk of these hazards causing harm. This is because they may not have anyone who can help or support them if things should go wrong.

Hazards where the risks are increased by lone working include the following:

- Physical and verbal aggression;
- Slips and trips;
- Manual handling;
- Fire;
- Hazardous chemicals and other dangerous substances.

More information on how to control these hazards is available from the UNISON Online Catalogue and UNISON Knowledge pages (see below for further details).

What can I expect from my employer?

Employers have a legal duty to risk assess all hazards. This involves:

1. Identifying the hazards;
2. Deciding who might be harmed and how;
3. Estimating the chance of harm and identifying ways to avoid or reduce the risk;
4. Recording and applying the findings;
5. Reviewing the risk assessment and updating as necessary.

Although there is nothing in law that specifically prohibits lone working, it increases the risk of any hazard. With some hazards this increase will be greater than others. The more likely lone working is to cause injury, such as when working with potentially violent clients or highly hazardous substances, the more time and resources the employer will be expected to devote to avoiding and/or minimizing the risks involved.

To find out more about what a risk assessment involves read the UNISON pamphlet, Are you at risk? (see below for further details).

How can employers manage the risks associated with lone working?

One obvious way is to eliminate lone working, and in many cases this is what employers should do. However sometimes this is not practicable. Where employers cannot eliminate lone working they must consider a range of measures, which include:

- Reducing the amount of time workers spend working alone;
- Identifying the times when lone workers are most at risk so that support and help can be targeted;
- Providing the means by which lone workers can summon help should they require it;
- Procedures which enable workers to leave details of their work schedules, including where they will be, expected arrival and departure times;
- Procedures for reporting in and raising the alarm when workers fail to do so;
- Providing workers with contact names and telephone numbers, especially for out of normal working hours.

What about mobile phones and lone worker devices?

Devices, such as personal alarms, panic buttons and mobile phones provide a means of keeping in touch and getting help. If used correctly and appropriately, they can make work safer. However they can be difficult and cumbersome to use, especially when someone is under attack or being threatened. Handling a phone can itself make the worker a target for attack, and they are not always reliable in some rural, and even urban, areas.

Some employers issue their staff with personal alarms that overcome some of these problems, allowing them to summon support quickly and discreetly. However even with the best of systems they do not prevent assaults occurring, and by the time help arrives staff may have already suffered serious injury. This is why the best way of managing a hazard is to prevent it occurring in the first place.

Finally, any device is only as good as the systems that support it. New technology should work in conjunction with robust procedures so that lone workers can easily keep in touch and get help should they need it.

What can I do to keep myself safe?

Your employer is ultimately legally responsible for your own and your colleagues' safety. However if you are working alone there are still things you can do to improve your personal safety.

1. Comply with all reasonable instructions from your employer, and attend any training provided by them regarding your health, safety and security;
2. Let someone know where you will be going, estimated times of arrival for appointments or return to base or home, and as far as is reasonably possible, stay in touch with your colleagues;
3. Look after personal belongings and minimise the time that cash or expensive equipment (such as mobile phones) are on show;
4. Avoid doing anything that puts your personal safety at risk such as:
 - Intervening in potentially violent situations that you are not trained to, or are unable to manage;
 - Lifting loads that are beyond your physical capabilities;
 - Using toxic substances which you have not been trained to handle.
5. Speak to your local safety or trade union rep if there is anything more your employer should be doing, but are not already doing, to keep you safe.

Finally, unionised workplaces are safe workplaces – so if you are not a member, join UNISON. If you are already a member, become more active, for example, by becoming a safety rep.

Other resources

Health and safety knowledge pages
www.unison.org.uk/safety

Guides available from UNISON online catalogue
www.unison.org.uk/catalogue

Are you at risk? – booklet for members explaining risk assessment (stock. no. 2720).

Working Alone – a health and safety guide on lone work for safety representatives (stock no 1750).

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